

Queering the Grammar School Boy: Class, Sexuality and Authenticity in the works of Colin MacInnes and Ray Gosling

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Introduction

In their writings on ‘the Teenager’ (often described as ‘the Boy’) between 1959 and 1961, Colin MacInnes and Ray Gosling translated teenage experiences and constructed memorable teenage subjects for both contemporary and later audiences. In this chapter, we will suggest that taken as a whole MacInnes’s work constructs a complex understanding of ‘the Boy’s’ political possibilities. By integrating an analysis his novelistic work with his journalistic and activist writing, we will demonstrate the complexity of MacInnes’s ‘Boy’ as an autonomous, queer political agent, embodied in the ultimate Boy: Ray Gosling. The two writers were close friends with MacInnes acting as a mentor to the younger Gosling, who in turn functioned as something of a confidant to the older man. We use the term ‘queer’ to mean both ‘mode of analysis and deconstruction relating to identity politics and resistance to the norm, *and* as a mode of description relating to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.’² For us, the significance of MacInnes’s and Gosling’s sexuality lies not in providing us with clues to their psycho-sexual motivation. Nor are we arguing that the Teenager was externally queered by gay Svengalis of the pop and fashion worlds. For our purposes, the Teenager is in itself a queered subject.

We will show how MacInnes’s one time flat mate, Ray Gosling, described as the ‘Professional Teenager’ constructed and occupied a disruptive space between dependent child and productive adult. He showed how the Teenager was at once a cynical marketing ploy, and a multiple shifting experience, queering the lines between the two. The Boy was a sexual as well as

generational identity. It was at once impossible and obtainable. The Teenager was the inhabitant of a Dreamland always ‘like a win on the pools, just around the corner’.³ In both Gosling’s and MacInnes’s narratives of teenage life, the Teenager provided an identity that was ‘progress’ driven within a liberal narrative of the modern, and resonant of authenticity, resistance and transgression. The Boy Gosling therefore embodied the spectrum of queer identified politics; multiple, and fragmented, whilst at the same time appealing to a set of collective, generational experiences. He was the template for the Teenager, providing inspiration for MacInnes’s literary creation: an iconic character which sought to embody a generational identity. At the same time Gosling offered a process for unpicking the template. In the second half of the chapter we will explore how Gosling’s Teenager was put together after his brief alienating experience of university life. Gosling ‘the scholarship boy’ found salvation in asserting the vibrant authenticity of working-class experience against the deadening norms of middle-class student life. We conclude the chapter by tracing Gosling’s trajectory from the early sixties, analysing his activism on behalf of queer and working-class communities and his controversial confession to a mercy killing, shortly before his own death in 2013. We begin however by exploring how *Absolute Beginners* was interpreted and understood in the mid-1980s, as a prelude to a discussion of an alternative reading of the novel and MacInnes’s queer politics.

Colin MacInnes

In 1959, Colin MacInnes published the second of his London novels, *Absolute Beginners*. In it, the unnamed protagonist is constructed as the iconic teenager, slick, cool, creative, with his ex-lover Crepe Suzette as the object of his art, and his Achilles heel. The novel is episodically framed over one summer, against a backdrop of racial tension, and has become a standard option for reading lists on youth culture and masculinity in the 1950s. Often treated as social

documentary rather than a work of fiction, it also stands as an infamous reminder of what 1980s retro could do to a novel when translated into film form. Julien Temple's 1986 musical adaptation starred Patsy Kensit as Crepe Suzette and featured David Bowie, Sade and Steven Berkoff. In the film the unnamed narrator, the Boy, is given MacInnes' name Colin, suggesting an identification with the author as protagonist, rather than as observer.⁴ The film signalled the emergence of a particularly English soul jazz scene in the eighties, around The Wag Club and artists like Sade, Carmel, Working Week and Paul Weller's Style Council. Production had not run smoothly, and the film was not received well. Similarly the scene it articulated was written off by Simon Reynolds in 1988 as a 'Hipster London elite'.⁵ Unlike Temple's punk films, *Absolute Beginners* has since become a marker of overblown, over-styled pop films. Over a decade after its release, Stephen Dalton described it as 'that nadir of vacuous Eighties style-whore cinema'.⁶

By returning to MacInnes's original texts, rather than this later adaptation, both Paul Weller and Billy Bragg have used MacInnes's words to attempt to draw clear lines of inheritance back to an imagined 'authentic' teenage culture. In so doing they have called up 'the Boy' to stand alongside them in solidarity: a classed identity in a multicultural context with implications for a reimagined 'Englishness'. Weller described *Absolute Beginners* as 'the ultimate mod book' and wrote the preface to its new edition in the wake of the film's release. Bragg named two of his albums after MacInnes's books.⁷ In fact Bragg thought that it might have been Weller who gave him the copy of *England, Half English* that inspired him to connect with MacInnes. For Bragg, MacInnes's Englishness was a 'cultural notion' which encompassed ethnic diversity and celebrated multiculturalism and cultural hybridity.⁸

Putting the queer back – subject and process

This diversity however had its own boundaries and borders. MacInnes's homosexuality and his acerbic personality provided his detractors with ample ammunition. His personal life has been used to wipe out his public political statements. When picked up by later writers and critics, the political potential of MacInnes's queer identity is either muted as in Bragg and Weller's recovery of 'The Boy' or erased entirely by the harshest critics of MacInnes's personal politics.⁹ Queer – whether conceived of as an approach or as an identity – gets lost in these more contemporary formulations. Despite the appropriation of MacInnes as the founding father of a classed and ethnically diverse Englishness, these identities, we argue, are inflected through a destabilising queerness. This is not a matter of reading MacInnes as either classed or as queered, but as we suggest class and queer identity can be read together, as inside/out, and as both subject and analysis.

MacInnes's politics

Although MacInnes was not always public about his homosexuality, he made political connections between the position of homosexuals and that of other marginalised groups. In his later life he became increasingly explicit about his queer politics. Prior to this he had spoken out against injustice and imperialism, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland and the situation of black Britons. Although himself a son of the imperial establishment, MacInnes was a friend to Michael X and defended the black community in Notting Hill from police harassment.¹⁰ He was involved in and wrote about debates over immigration, the Elgin marbles,¹¹ Ireland,¹² racism and discrimination,¹³ censorship,¹⁴ drug use,¹⁵ prostitution,¹⁶ and black liberation¹⁷ and was part of the process that opened up public debate on these issues. A regular on the Radio 4 programme 'The Critics', he was also involved with 'the underground' and liberationist movements. He supported the defence of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Oz*, also contributing to the latter publication.¹⁸ Yet throughout it all, MacInnes was clearly the

product of a privileged and literary background.¹⁹ In short, MacInnes was a generational and cultural translator. Using his 'half in, half out' position he produced guides to hidden worlds; for example, his 'guide to jumbles' explains to the white community what MacInnes thinks various black communities think of them. His essays 'pop songs and teenagers' and 'Sharp Schmutter' were both guides to teenage life and style aimed at a much older readership. Although originally published in magazines, these essays were later included in his collection *England Half English* complete with annotated reflections and afterthoughts from 1961. In the process, of course, this work constructs the hidden worlds not just as unseen, but as other. He cannot step outside his own context however. His readers should, he wrote, appreciate 'pop discs' in the same way that they would 'the native masks and ivories' that he assumes they've collected.²⁰ Perhaps it is these seeming contradictions and crossovers, rather than his sexuality, that lead so many to describe MacInnes as 'perverse'.²¹

Work on MacInnes's resistance

Beyond biography, academics have noted the layers of resistance in MacInnes' life and work and the ways in which he queered the fifties. As Nick Bentley has shown MacInnes's 'radical experiment with narrative forms' reproduced the 'submerged worlds of London's 1950s'. The episodic structure of MacInnes's writing, as attested by Bentley and Connor, indicated the fragmentary nature of subcultural lives.²² For Bentley, *Absolute Beginners* 'offers a diverse representation of identifying multiple subcultures within the term youth' (n.p). This diversity undermines the over determinist coherence found in much of the early work on youth (for example, by Phil Cohen and Richard Hoggart).²³ Alan Sinfield's work on cultural materialism situates sexuality at the heart of post-war cultural change. Sinfield uses both MacInnes and Gosling to demonstrate the blurring of British and American cultural codes.²⁴ We want to build on these readings to trace a similarly disruptive element of his work across and between forms.

Part journalism, part social commentary, part fiction, MacInnes's queered form and genre, reproduced a queered subject. Matt Cook and Richard Hornsey have identified the 'bricolage' of fragmented narratives in the 1950s and early 1960s as ways of 'form[ing] provisional queer' positions 'against the heteronormative prescriptions of post-war British Culture.'²⁵ Indeed, the queer bricolage of MacInnes's writing and life history was recognised by his peers. George Melly, for example, saw MacInnes as an advocate of the 'portmanteau permissiveness of the sixties'.²⁶ As Richard Hornsey has noted, MacInnes's fiction was 'far from explicitly queer'.²⁷ Indeed it is this lack of explicitly queer *content* that has allowed us to situate MacInnes and his work as queer in a dual sense: both in terms of his subjectivity and his *mode* of analysis.

Queer content

If MacInnes was implicitly queer in his fiction, his non-fiction writing explicitly addressed queer themes. MacInnes used his journalistic writing to extend the debates around homosexuality, and indeed personal politics more generally. In the 1950s MacInnes wrote articles condemning the homosexual subculture he saw around him. He described English Queerdom as 'one of the most unpleasant groups on the earth's crust'.²⁸ MacInnes rejected the reformism of the Wolfenden Report from its inception as a way of changing homosexual men's lives.²⁹ He challenged both the prurient interest in Oscar Wilde's trials and Wilde's status as 'the homosexual martyr' at a time when films such as *Oscar Wilde* (1959) and *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* (1960), were being used to ventriloquize the struggle from Wolfenden to what would become the Sexual Offences Act.³⁰ He was also critical of the reformist groups fronted by professional, heterosexual do-gooders.³¹ Much of his later journalism was written from a queer subject position. He wrote for *Gay Left*, *Gay News* and published his exploration of bisexuality, *Loving Them Both* in 1973.³² These positions layered queer narratives in his work and queer identities in his biography.

Queered teenager

This helps to understand how the queered Teenager has been constructed within the context of MacInnes's wider published work, particularly his journalism and his biographical context. As Bentley has argued, the lines between fact and fiction are disturbed in MacInnes's work which makes it 'problematic for traditional literary criticism.'³³ Sometimes his work is treated as documentary, particularly as MacInnes himself acknowledged in his writing about teenagers.³⁴ Stuart Hall, for example, found *Absolute Beginners* more 'authentic' in its understanding of both the social context and the collective strategies developed by teenagers than either memoirs or social surveys. Hall reviewed the novel alongside E. R. Braithwaite's memoir of his time teaching in an East End Secondary Modern, *To Sir, With Love*, and two social surveys for *Universities and Left Review* in 1959. Most notable, for Hall, was the way in which MacInnes's *Boy*, 'comes straight at us' with his own moral compass. This, for Hall was what gave the book its status as 'social documentary' and took it beyond 'inspired journalism'.³⁵ Yet to MacInnes the use of his work as social document could also undermine his craft, as he regarded his fiction as less documentary, and more 'poetic evocations of the human situation.'³⁶ This sense of MacInnes and his texts as inside/outside (both positionally and in terms of literary modes) is picked up by most commentators. In the queered sense, he was also both inside and outside in terms of his construction of his own sexual identity and of *The Boy*. The participant observer in fiction, life history, and journalistic writing has helped construct a version of the period that privileges subjectivities whilst maintaining the possibility of detached and impartial social investigation, and the pull of authenticity, 'or of being there'. MacInnes did not, he wrote, 'document' an existing teenage culture and language; he made it up.³⁷ He was both a participant observer *and* a creative writer. This has allowed the fifties as seen through MacInnes's works of cultural production to have their queer cake and eat it, to engage with

queer as a mode of disruption of coherent identities, and as a way of articulating the same identities.

Queering the Boy

Amongst the teenagers, MacInnes saw an international army for a new Children's Crusade.³⁸ It was, however, a distinctly masculine army. MacInnes and the Boy had their own limits when it came to girls. Where girls are acknowledged, they are, like Crepe Suzette, some 'sharp cat's bird or chick'.³⁹ The parents' generation may have accommodated women's rights, he wrote, but the youth culture was more tribal (instinctive perhaps) and therefore masculine. On the streets '[t]he boys walked ahead, their expressionless faces, surmounted by Tony Curtis hair-dos, bent in exclusive masculine communion'.⁴⁰ Their scavenger style picked up from images of American and European dress and fed out to the streets via high street retailers like Marks and Spencer. The teenager was the product of their international and local economic base and their parade dress took advantage of the wonder of modern manufacturing; it was precise, light weight and drip dry.⁴¹ MacInnes noted that rather than signalling an unmanly turn to the 'effete', this brought with it a welcome concern with hygiene and cleanliness.⁴² The cleanliness market did, however, help to queer the Boy. It directed 'him' to window shopping, consumption, unisex hair salons and what MacInnes described as 'bisexual remedies for body odour'.⁴³

The Boy was not just transgressive of the boundaries between work and leisure, adulthood and adolescence, communities and classes, he was a profoundly sexualised, and sexually disruptive subject. If, as we have suggested, The Boy can be read as queer, furthermore, the Boy in *Absolute Beginners* queered the line between fact and fiction, representing for many a more 'authentic' teenager than those depicted in the contemporary journalism of MacInnes and

others. In the next section we argue that this simultaneous pull of authenticity and disruption extends beyond the text, across the genres of MacInnes's writing and into the intertwined life histories of both MacInnes and Gosling. We analyse Gosling's self-composure as *The Boy*, in his own words, to demonstrate the queerness of the teenager; as both a subject and as a way of examining the world. Here we show that teenagers could be analysts of their own conditions in their own terms, and were not simply subject to MacInnes's constructions, despite the inherent messiness of Gosling and MacInnes's relationship. Gosling's class and youth were central to his appeal as both the embodiment of the working-class teenager, and as an 'authentic' guide to teenage culture. However, his educational experiences, metropolitan connections (including his relationship with MacInnes) and sexuality meant that he was, like MacInnes, simultaneously inside and outside the subcultures he was describing.

Ray Gosling: From Scholarship Boy to Dream Boy

As a teenager Gosling was both a Ted 'follower' ('part of the wave, but a believer') and as he recalls 'in a group of working class grammar schoolboys christened the "grubbies" or "arty-farties"'. We were interested in things of the mind. It was rather an elite set.'⁴⁴ Despite being from a working-class background, his identification as a *worker* began at 15 when he started a summer job as a signalman:

I used to go back after working on the railway with an absolute contempt for everyone else in the school because they hadn't, or so I thought, the faintest idea of life ... Mine was quite a big school – 900 pupils – and I don't suppose there'd be more than a dozen boys who had any conception of what work was life for the mass of people. Your father can do it but you have to do it yourself to understand.⁴⁵

At this stage of his life this feeling of being defiantly working class put Gosling in a rather different category from the ‘uprooted and the anxious’ scholarship boy depicted by Richard Hoggart in the *Uses of Literacy*. Worker, Ted, “Grubbie” intellectual – Gosling moved across these roles with ease. It was only on leaving school to read English at Leicester University that Gosling began to feel distinctly out of place amongst his middle-class peers: ‘Anything like the lively interest in life I’d found in the pubs, caffs and on the railway didn’t exist. They’d no style ... I liked the staff and made friends. I liked the library, but hated the students and there was nothing wrong with them.’⁴⁶ Gosling made his escape – both to London, where he met MacInnes – and to the burgeoning music scene in Leicester where he began managing bands and set up the ‘Chez Ray Rock’ night at the Co-op hall.⁴⁷

By 1960 Gosling was ‘The Boy’. He was however not simply a muse or protégé, he was the agent of his own construction. Like MacInnes, in blurring the lines between fact and fiction in his *own* writing Gosling acted as a spokesman for his generation. He used the label ‘absolute beginner’ to describe his generations’ year zero role in the history of youth.⁴⁸ For Gosling ‘The Great Big Us’ of absolute beginners had taken over from the Teddy Boy. At the conclusion to *Absolute Beginners*, MacInnes’s Boy greets a group of Africans, newly arrived at the airport: ‘They all looked so damned pleased to be in England, at the end of their long journey, that I was heartbroken at all the disappointments that were in store for them. And I ran up to them, through the water, and shouted out above the engines, “Welcome to London! Greetings from England! Meet your first teenager! We’re all going up to Napoli to have a ball!”’⁴⁹

Like MacInnes’ hero, Gosling’s role was to act as guide to the subcultural codes and spaces he inhabited, to present evidence and insights to the outside world.⁵⁰ Gosling introduced the

‘Dream Boy’ and its multiplicities, performativities and queered rebellion in an article for *New Left Review* in 1960. Although introduced as a young signalman and youth club organiser, Gosling makes it clear that identities are far more complicated than job labels or bureaucratic roles: ‘The Boy stands up in his sexual and phallic dress, a rebel against a sexless world of fear, and from his own he has made gods. In his dress, his walk, in his whole way of life he makes a private drama for the world that failed him to take note of.’⁵¹ He goes on to note: ‘[The Boy] st[ood] in an age of frustration as a dreamlover’, attracting both ‘the society moll and the homosexual’.⁵² Youthful masculinity and homosexual undercurrents were inseparable for Gosling. He spoke for those who were simultaneously ‘[d]reaming of being a Boy-God, [and] dreaming of being in love with a Boy-God.’⁵³ In his simultaneous position as agent and observer Gosling, and his self-made Boy-God, confound categories. The Boy is not a mere object of study in the growing body of work on delinquency, nor is he the passive consumer of mass marketing – Gosling’s Boy-God combines agent, analyst and organiser.

The article (described as a “manifesto”) was based on his experiences of helping to run a ‘self-programming’ youth club in Leicester. *The Daily Mirror* described it as the ‘Toughest Youth Club in England’, and it was run by young people, for young people. There was no table tennis table or ““administering angel” wanting to take [the young people] off the street’. It was potentially, ‘the most daring and fruitful youth experiment of the century’ according to the *Mirror* journalist who visited.⁵⁴ Gosling wanted to use the lessons of this experiment to fill-in the considerable gaps in understanding evident in the ‘Albermarle Report’ on The Youth Service in England and Wales (1960).⁵⁵ Whilst the report ‘knew nothing about teenagers in 1960’ Gosling’s writing performed the Teenager from the inside out. Gosling wrote up the experience in *Lady Albermarle’s Boys* the first Young Fabian Pamphlet in 1961. Like MacInnes’s journalistic work, Gosling’s report was designed to speak of his own experience, and to his own identified community, but also to act as a guide for the general public who had

‘struck’ him as being ‘grossly ill formed’ about the ‘Service of Youth, [and] the habits and behaviour of the young generation’.⁵⁶ He provided a bench mark for the period in the construction of a number of categories: Boys: Dream Boys, Ordinary Boys, Lady Albermarle’s Boys, Boy-Gods, as attested by Stan Cohen’s use of Gosling’s writing in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, which was reviewed by MacInnes.⁵⁷

We have long understood the need to talk about identities through the complex processes of their mutual production and intersections – not understanding masculinity without looking at femininity, understanding race as constructed simultaneously along lines of blackness and whiteness. However, our construction of Teenage culture has largely focussed on the emergence of youth identity along its own lines of distinction between childhood, adolescence, youth and adulthood. When MacInnes constructed the Boy, and when Gosling composed himself as the Boy, we are able to see the ways in which ageing and youth are constructed together, at the time, and of course, over time through their autobiographical writings. MacInnes built the Boy in response to his own sense of ageing, and with hope for The Boy’s imagined future. In 1961 he wrote ‘I cannot deny I regret that youth is gone: not so much because I am no longer young, as because, when I was young, I didn’t really know it: and thus missed many opportunities of using youth as now I wish I had.’ He continues, ‘one sad joy of being middle-aged is that most of us can love youth as we never could when we were part of it’.⁵⁸ Unable to have experienced it himself, MacInnes framed, identified and disrupted the Teenager instead. Meanwhile Gosling was growing up. In so doing he became the commentator and composer, this time of MacInnes as much as of himself.

The Boy Grows Up

For Ray Gosling, Colin MacInnes was ‘the man I looked up to, who was my mentor more than anyone else.’⁵⁹ He has been described by others as both a ‘disciple’ and ‘protégé’ of MacInnes’,⁶⁰ but we want to suggest that he was more than that, an embodiment of the Teenager, but also a site of disruption. MacInnes, the writer and The Man, was also reconstructed in relationship to Gosling, The Boy. Later in established adulthood Gosling gets relabelled as MacInnes’ ‘friend and memoirist’, a reciprocal relationship. Having grown out of being MacInnes’ Boy, after MacInnes’s death in 1976, it becomes Gosling’s turn to compose a self for MacInnes through his own biographical narratives. Each, therefore, composed the other. As well as a chapter dedicated to their relationship in *Personal Copy*, which is identical to the introduction dated 1978 that Gosling wrote to MacInnes’s posthumous collection of essays *Out of the Way*, Gosling presented Radio 4’s *Prophets, Charlatans and Little Gurus*, about MacInnes in October 1982.⁶¹ Gosling grew up to make up his mentor on his own terms as MacInnes had constructed his ageing process around the discursive centrality of The Boy.

Gosling’s political activism from the mid-1960s and beyond encompassed both gay politics and advocacy on behalf of working-class communities. The bulk of the latter centred on the campaign against the wholesale redevelopment of the St Ann’s district in Nottingham, to which Gosling dedicated the second half of *Personal Copy* to describing. A nineteenth-century neighbourhood of 10,000 houses, with a population of over 30,000 the clearance of St Ann’s, which took place over a period of about ten years from the mid-1960s, was one of the largest redevelopment programmes in Europe. It also proved to be one of the most controversial. 1966 saw the establishment of SATRA the St Ann’s Tenant’s and Resident’s Association – chaired by Gosling. SATRA strongly criticised the complete lack of public consultation regarding clearance and campaigned for selective renewal. In a report for Nottingham’s Civic Society Gosling stated: ‘We intend to show ... that it is economically possible and humanly desirable

to take the very bad out now, patch for the present the not so bad, improve the reasonable, preserve the good.’⁶² Ultimately, despite the petitions, public meetings, challenges and small victories for democratic involvement and accountability, it was a battle which Gosling and his colleagues lost. As he reflected: ‘Change came like a torrent, sweeping all before it: houses, streets, chapels, shops, pubs, the whole old life [...] A history was wiped away.’⁶³ Yet Gosling’s nostalgia was inflected with a sense of standing both inside and outside the community he had chosen to represent:

I wasn’t born there, bred or raised. I’m not a native of what I call my district. I’m a latter day immigrant who freely chose to foist myself on “poor” people, like a Robin Hood, to fire slings and arrows at Aunt Sallies for the gratification of my own principles and for my own amusement as much as anybody’s good.⁶⁴

This privileged inside/outsider status was deployed to rather greater effect in his approach to the politics of gay rights.

Like MacInnes, Gosling engaged with queer politics as both a subject position and a mode of analysis. Throughout his activism Gosling’s politics were queered and classed. He was critical of the elite reformism ‘by stealth’ of the earlier law reform campaigns and he became vice-president of Campaign for Homosexual Equality in 1975.⁶⁵ Alongside his long-time comrade, Alan Horsfall, he ran the Gay Monitor website until his death. Like Horsfall, his focus lay beyond the relatively privileged metropolitan gay centres, to the provincial North and Midlands. In fact, no longer likely to be seen as a ‘professional Teenager’, he was instead represented (erroneously, given his East Midlands heritage) as a ‘professional Northerner’, whose documentaries recorded, and to some extent romanticised working-class lives.⁶⁶

Gosling's class, location and sexual identity made him an important critical commentator during the Bolton 7 case in 1998. The case saw the prosecution of seven men for consensual sexual acts in the 'privacy' of one of their homes in Bolton. All the men were known to each other, and the party had been videoed using a home camera. The video was used as the evidence in the trial in which all seven men were charged with a series of potentially imprisonable offences including buggery, and the rather catch-all charge of "gross indecency". All the defendants were convicted, three lost their jobs and the trial cost £500,000. The case made clear the boundaries between public and private left over from the 1967 Sexual Offences Act and further constructed two queer constituencies and ascribed each a value according to class. On the one hand the sophisticated, affluent, Canal Street, on the other the 'unsophisticated', rough, working-class house parties.⁶⁷ The case also drew sharp lines according to age. The judge's sentencing pointed out the 'immature and unsophisticated' nature of the younger defendants. Their queerness denied them adulthood or agency, to the judge their same-sex activity was 'little more than.... smutty-minded schoolboys tipsily experimenting with sex.'⁶⁸ Whilst the five younger men (between the ages of 18 and 25) were given community service, the two older men (aged 33 and 55) received (suspended) custodial sentences.⁶⁹ Video footage had been at the heart of the case. Gosling responded in kind. He made a documentary about the case for Channel 4, *Sex, Lies and Video Tapes*. In the documentary he wielded his inside/outsider status to document working-class queer lives in northern England, in itself an usual thing.

Like MacInnes before him, Gosling continued to blur the lines between experience and memory, fact and fiction. The grown man Gosling was built up of the paper traces of his pasts. Gosling's *Sum Total* was a 'sort of autobiography', and his later *Personal Copy: A Memoir of*

the Sixties, was a 'fairly true story'. Although presented and marketed as one of the ever growing number of sixties memoirs it was actually largely a collection of previously published journalism, topped and tailed to shift a chronology and compose a life narrative. In 2005 Gosling's ageing process became the subject of a documentary *Ray Gosling OAP* for BBC 4. A £5,000 tax bill, left unpaid had spiralled into a massive debt. Gosling was bankrupt and about to lose his home. His impending move into sheltered accommodation meant he had to clear out the piles of paper notes and files that filled 'almost every square inch' of his home. He fought to remain in his own home and be allowed to keep and curate the mountains of 'documents' of his own past.⁷⁰ As the Bolton 7 case had shown, sharp lines can be drawn across the more blurred lines of disruption. The slippery lines across fact and fiction, experience and documentary evidence came to a head for Gosling in 2010 at the age of 70. In a documentary he disclosed that he had 'smothered' to death a lover who was dying of AIDS. The documentary, for BBC East Midlands on the subject of death was appropriately named *Inside Out*. He went on to repeat his confession on breakfast television. The story spoke of the contemporary debates on euthanasia, and of the tragedy of a generation of gay men, lost or left grieving by AIDS. He told the filmmakers:

'I killed someone once. He was a young chap, he had been my lover and he had got Aids. In hospital, the doctor said, "There's nothing we can do." He was in terrible pain. I said to the doctor, "Leave me just a bit." I picked up the pillow and smothered him until he was dead. The doctor came back and I said, "He's gone." Nothing more was said.'⁷¹ It was a powerful story but it did not hold its own power for long. Gosling insisted that he would not identify the man, the hospital or town where the death occurred. But journalists offered cash incentives for anyone who would come forward to identify the dead man, or Gosling's previous lovers. The police investigated the 'mercy killing' as suspected murder and three days after the interview

was broadcast Gosling was interviewed for over 30 hours before being bailed.⁷² During the interview Gosling conceded and named his lover; Tony Judson.

Newspaper reports of the events unravelled the story's emotional authenticity. As Gosling's life and writing had already shown there were 'laws in books and there is a law in your heart'.⁷³ These were not the same thing. The fallout from the revelation also suggested that there are truths, or social documents, in books, and rather different truths in your heart. According to the *Mirror*, Gosling's younger lover had died in a British hospital in the late 1970s, 'in the early days of AIDS'. The first documented case of a gay men dying of AIDS, in New York is generally recognised to have been in 1981. Gosling accepted that the story was fiction, not fact, and the usefulness of that fiction was lost. He was eventually charged not with murder but with wasting police time, and received a 90 day suspended sentence.

In one interview Gosling explained his confession as the product of slipped tenses, 'between the past and conditional'.⁷⁴ Having written himself through boyhood and into the man he became, it was left to Gosling's obituary writers to make sense of the fictitious truth behind the story. Gosling had explained the layers of investment in his story, beyond its authenticity. He told his friend, Tony Roe, that '[a]t his friend's funeral ...he was harangued for not ending the suffering sooner. So for the next 30 years he told himself and believed himself that he had. He had wanted to do the right thing and to have been seen to do the right thing.'⁷⁵ He had been moved to disclose the story as some sort of recompense for all the stories that he had collected over time; 'everyone else had revealed themselves to me', he said, 'and I felt I had to reveal myself to them'.⁷⁶

¹ We would like to thank Amelia Fletcher, Rob Pursey and Nick Bentley.

- ² Victoria Powell, "QUEER 50s, Birkbeck, University of London, 6–7 May 2009," *History Workshop Journal*, 69, (2010): 283.
- ³ Ray Gosling, "Dream Boy," *New Left Review*, 3, May/June (1960): 31.
- ⁴ *Absolute Beginners*, directed by Julien Temple, London: Goldcrest and Virgin Films, 1986.
- ⁵ Simon Reynolds, "Sinead O'Connor: Hammersmith Odeon, London", *Melody Maker*, January 2, 1988.
- ⁶ Stephen Dalton, "Glam Rock: Scary Monsters, Super Freaks #1", *Uncut*, November, 1998.
- ⁷ *England, Half English* and *Mr Love and Justice*.
- ⁸ Terry Staunton, "Billy Bragg: Patriot Games", *Record Collector*, December, 2007.
- ⁹ See the critical remarks of Darcus Howe in Ed Vulliamy, "Absolute MacInnes," *The Observer*, April 15, 2007, accessed October 31, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/apr/15/britishidentity.fiction>
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